

# twelvebaskets



## ADVENT 4B

A complete Sunday service ready to use  
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

Produced by **twelvebaskets**. Subscription available from **theworshipcloud.com**

**Advent 4 - Year B**  
24th December 2023



## **Order of Service**

Call to worship

**Hymn:**

**186 STF – Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! OR**

**178 STF – Long ago, prophets knew Christ would come**

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

**Hymn:**

**176 STF – Like a candle flame, flickering small in our darkness OR**

**546 STF – Behold the servant of the Lord!**

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55

**Hymn:**

**206 STF – It was on a starry night OR**

**221 STF – While shepherds watched their flocks by night**

Reflections on the readings

**Hymn:**

**208 STF – Let earth and heaven combine OR**

**185 STF – Sing we the King who is coming to reign**

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

**Hymn:**

**202 STF – Hark! The herald angels sing OR**

**216 STF – See him lying in a bed of straw**

Blessing

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The Vine Services are compiled and produced by twelvebaskets.

**Many more resources and inspiration for this week's lectionary, leading worship and other church use are available on [www.theworshipcloud.com](http://www.theworshipcloud.com).**

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## Call to worship

*(You may wish to use your own liturgy for lighting Advent candles at this point in the worship).*

God is amongst us, here, present, with, incarnate, and ever so real.  
As we celebrate the meaning of Christmas, and tell the story in readings, carols and reflections, we listen for your Spirit speaking to us today.  
Come amongst us, Christmas God.

Amen.<sup>1</sup>

## Hymn:

186 STF – Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! OR

178 STF – Long ago, prophets knew Christ would come

## Opening Prayers

Advent God, we come to you in prayer on this the eve of the celebration of your coming.  
Christmas God, we come to thank and praise you for your love for us, made known to us in the miraculous arrival of your son, Jesus Christ.

Advent God, as we wait, with baited breath, for your coming,  
We travel to the manger-side in our minds,  
Bringing our selves, our world, our hopes and our fears.  
Come amongst us, by your Spirit, Christmas God.

Advent God, we pray for all who live with poverty and injustice today,  
And all who will not experience the joy of Christmas in the coming days.  
Christmas God, we thank you for the work of All We Can and other organisations and people who are seeking to build a world in which every person's potential can be fulfilled.  
Help us to play our part in making your kingdom a reality.

Advent God, we know that we have fallen short of your plans for our lives and have failed you, this day and in the past days.  
We spend a moment now, in quiet, confessing our failings to the God of the manger.

## *Silence*

Christmas God, even as we confess our sins, we know that your incarnation means that you understand our human failings, you forgive us, accept us just as we are, and set us free.

Thank you for the Christmas-grace this day, Lord God.

As we worship, as we wait, as we prepare a space for your coming,  
May we know you here with us, God of Advent, God of Christmas, God of every moment,

Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Call to worship written by Tim Baker

<sup>2</sup> Opening prayers written by All We Can – you can order an Extraordinary Gift for someone this Christmas at [allwecan.org.uk/gifts](http://allwecan.org.uk/gifts)

## We say together the Lord's Prayer

### All Age Talk

*The reflection includes a short sketch with parts are enacted by members of the congregation, who could be wearing large labels around their necks showing who they are. The text here can be elaborated on as talent and time permit! God might be a voice offstage – a female voice would contrast with the two other parts.*

*While David and Nathan wait in the wings, begin with some questions and see where they lead...*

- Did anyone spend last night in a tent?
- A stable?
- Where did you all spend last night?...
- What about tonight? Anyone planning to camp out?
- Anyone having to sleep in a different bed/on the floor because you're expecting visitors?
- Anyone expecting any other visitors later tonight?! (keep any conversation around the possible visit of Father Christmas suitably vague and non-committal!)

One of the Bible readings which we look at on this Christmas Eve talks about God living in a house or living in a tent. It's quite long but just listen to some of it. Let's meet King David and his chief religious advisor, Nathan the prophet. They're talking about the Ark of the Covenant – not Noah's Ark, but a sacred box, covered with gold, where God was thought to live:

King David I live in a lovely house, made from cedar wood, but the Ark of God stays in a tent!

Nathan Good point – why don't you build a proper house for it? I'm sure God would be pleased.

King David I think I will – maybe tomorrow.

*Both lie down to sleep.*

God Nathan!

Nathan Yes! Hello God!

God Why didn't you ask me if I wanted a house? I've never lived in a house, I prefer camping and moving about with my tent. Could you tell David that please? He'll understand – he was just a shepherd boy when I first met him – sleeping out under the stars every night. And tell him, that if anyone is going to build a house for anyone else, it will be me building it for him.

Nathan (*scribbling*) Okay God, I think I've got that. I'll tell him first thing in the morning.

*Nathan gets up*

Nathan Your Majesty!

King David Yes, Nathan?

Nathan I have a message for you from God... seems like the house of cedar isn't the right thing for God after all?

King David What do you mean?

Nathan (*rubbing his eyes*) Well, it was a bit strange, but in the night God told me to tell you not to build a house after all, seems the tent is the preferred divine dwelling place!

King David Really? Camping?! In this weather?! Oh well, if that's what God prefers, I'll cancel the order from B&Q.

Nathan There was another bit to the message too, but I don't understand it...

King David Go on.

Nathan Well, God said (*gets a bit of paper out of pocket and reads his own scribbled note*): 'And tell him', God said, 'that if anyone is going to build a house for anyone else, it will be me building it for him.'

*Both look puzzled, shrug and exit.*

No wonder Nathan and David didn't understand that last bit – no-one did for about a thousand years, but that's another story!

What is amazing though, on this Christmas Eve, is that we remember that when God did come to live on earth, being born as a baby, it still wasn't to live in a palace or a fine house of cedar wood. Jesus spent his first few weeks sleeping in a wooden manger in a humble house in Bethlehem, but even more remarkable than that, God came in the most fragile of all materials – human flesh – to live as one of us, a human being.

God still comes to live in human flesh as each of us makes room in our hearts and lives for the Spirit of God to live and be at work. God rejects no-one. That's what I call good news!

Amen.<sup>3</sup>

### **Hymn:**

176 STF – Like a candle flame, flickering small in our darkness OR

546 STF – Behold the servant of the Lord!

**Readings:** 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55

### **Hymn:**

206 STF – It was on a starry night OR

221 STF – While shepherds watched their flocks by night

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<sup>3</sup> All Age Talk written by Jill Baker

## Reflections on the readings

Houses and homes take on particular significance at this season of Christmas, so let's stick with that idea as we reflect on two of today's set bible passages, from 2 Samuel and from Luke's gospel.

In the British Isles, as in many cultures and countries around the world, many homes will be decorated for the season – and there is no shortage of sparkle in the shops for that purpose! Indeed the choices can be overwhelming... should the tree be artificial or real, should there be a tasteful colour scheme or a conglomeration of everyone's favourite bauble, should the lights go up on 1st or 24th December?! It's possible that some here today may be purists on this and will only be decorating tonight... but I think most of us bow to the pressure of culture at some point during the Advent season!

Amidst all this festive frivolity (and perhaps in part because of it), this is also a time of year when we are particularly aware that many people in our communities are homeless. Figures from homelessness charities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland suggest that in 2021 more than 350,000 people were assessed as homeless.<sup>4</sup> Only a small proportion of these are rough sleepers – they perhaps are the ones perhaps whom we notice – but there are many others, who may be sofa surfing, squatting or in some other form of temporary housing.

So in this, as in so many other respects, Christmas is a season of contrasts. Most of us will know a mixture of joy and sorrow over the coming days, of laughter and lament, of blessing and of heartbreak. For whilst we know there are very good reasons to rejoice at God's Incarnation amongst us, we may also be struggling with pain or depression, grief or isolation, economic challenge or debt. What do these ancient words say to us in all these emotions and experiences?

If we are looking for mixed emotions and paradoxical behaviour, we couldn't do better than start with King David. A man described as being 'after God's own heart' and yet a man who often got it wrong too. And our little cameo story from 2 Samuel 7 is one such scenario, where he gets it wrong. Living himself in a grand palace, David assumes that God should have the same and proposes building a grand home for the Ark of the Covenant. At first Nathan, the prophet, agrees this seems like a good idea, but overnight God reveals a preference for canvas – as we've already explored earlier in the service!

Perhaps the heart of this story and the message which we can take into our own Christmas celebrations is that it's dangerous to make assumptions about God, particularly assumptions which imagine that God can't be bothered with ordinary people like us or ordinary families and homes like ours. It easily happens, because for most of us most of the time it's easier to make God in our own image than to accept that we are made in God's image.

How might that affect how we celebrate tomorrow? If you are the chief cook with the full weight of a turkey resting on your shoulders tonight (or the equivalent burden in nuts and pulses) let the worry go... God won't mind if it all goes wrong! In Proverbs we are assured that 'Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife'. (Proverbs 17:1)

Does God mind if the presents aren't as costly or as numerous as our neighbours, or the tree isn't as tall, or as straight as that one down the road, or the cards are still in a shoe box under the stairs waiting to be hung or the cake is bought not home-made... ? Somehow, I don't think so. If we do all these things, hopefully it's because we love to do them as a way

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics derived from [https://invisible people](https://invisiblepeople.org.uk/) ('More than' because some of the figures given are for households).

of showing love – love of God and the Christmas message and love of those with whom we might share it. If not, we might, like David, be told to forget it!

Before we look at how Mary's assumptions about God were also challenged, let's spend a couple of minutes on that final bit of the Old Testament passage. God tells Nathan to tell the king that it is God who will build a house for David, not the other way round. Here we are in the realms of Dynasty (not a re-run of the American soap, although I can't promise that won't be part of the Christmas TV schedules) but the founding of the Davidic line which is an important thread from this point on throughout the rest of the story of the Old Testament and which resurfaces dramatically with the birth of Jesus. In some of our carols we sing that Jesus was 'born of David's line'; Luke makes sure we know that Joseph, Mary's betrothed, into whose lineage Jesus will be born, was himself 'of the house of David'. This is almost a coded way of telling the Jewish readers that Jesus will bring in a new Golden Age, his birth is the start of a new kingdom, a new way of relating to God, a new world. Which, of course it is.

No-one knew that better than Mary, who also had her life and her assumptions turned upside down by the activity of God. As a young girl, living in Nazareth, in the northern hill country of Palestine, betrothed to be married to a carpenter, Mary has a visit from an angel who tells her she will become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit and will give birth to a son. She is to name the child Jesus and he will be given 'the throne of his ancestor David' and 'will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end' (Luke 1:32-33).

A few weeks after this dramatic announcement, Mary travels to the home of her much older cousin, Elizabeth, also pregnant, and her song of praise, known as the Magnificat, reveals some of her surprise and wonder at what is happening!

As we hear those words read again today, perhaps we note the wonder in Mary's voice. Let's read between the lines a bit too:

- Mary is astounded that God has chosen her – a lowly servant, not, she might be thinking, a royal princess.
- She can't get over what this powerful and holy God has done for her – an ordinary young woman.
- She rejoices that those who are proud are being scattered – perhaps she has in mind the religious leaders, or the self-righteous individuals who may have shunned her for her pregnancy.
- She somehow understands that this child to whom she will give birth will turn the world upside down, bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly.
- Humble as she is, and hungry for more of God, she is the one who has been filled with goodness – whilst those already full of their own wealth or self-importance can receive nothing more.

Mary's song of praise is both beautiful and subversive. It is a mandate for revolution, for building a kingdom of justice, peace and dignity for all – especially those who have been over-looked. It couldn't be a better prescription for what Christmas can be.

So, unless we are the powerful, proud and exploitative people to whom Mary refers, this is a good news message for us. God comes to the humble, Jesus inhabits the lowly, the Spirit is at work through the ordinary. A good Christmas is not about what's on the dinner table or under the Christmas tree, a good Christmas is about what's in the heart. If we want Jesus to be at the centre of Christmas for us this year, we only have to invite him.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Reflection written by Jill Baker

**Hymn:**

208 STF – Let earth and heaven combine OR

185 STF – Sing we the King who is coming to reign

**Prayers of intercession**

Let us pray,

God of Justice, forgive us when our Christmases become more about what we can get than what we can give.

Forgive us when our Christmas stories eclipse the Christ child from the centre.

Forgive us when we indulge our Christmas lunch with little thought for those who are going hungry.

Forgive us when our Christmas trees are dressed more extravagantly than our poor neighbours.

In all the ways our Christmas celebrations miss your heart for your world, forgive us.

*[Pause]*

As we leave the journey of preparation and Advent behind, and go into this Christmas period, loving God, we know the remarkable nature of your forgiveness, evidenced in your commitment to living alongside us, suffering with us, becoming human – an extraordinary gift indeed.

Come, God of justice, to all who need you to visit them this year.

Come, that a world of poverty, pain and brokenness might catch a glimpse of the Christ-light at the manger-side.

Come, let us share our gifts, this Christmas eve, that all may see the miracle of your coming, God with us, Immanuel,

Amen.<sup>6</sup>

**We will now take up the offering.**

The word becomes flesh, and lives amongst us.

As we go from here, as we celebrate the amazing gift that is Jesus Christ, may we use our gifts to do something extraordinary in your world.

Accept these, and all our prayers, in Jesus' name,

Amen.<sup>7</sup>

**Hymn:**

202 STF – Hark! The herald angels sing OR

216 STF – See him lying in a bed of straw

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<sup>6</sup> Prayers of intercession written by All We Can

<sup>7</sup> Additional prayers by Tim Baker



## **Blessing**

Go in peace, and discover the Prince of Peace at work in the world.

Go with grace, and learn something from the Wonderful Counsellor.

Go in love, and meet with the Creator God, made known in a baby, lying in manger.

Amen.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Additional prayers by Tim Baker